



RED DUST

The shoal was skirting the edge of a plankton bloom that grew where deep currents hit the edge of the shield of Tiger Mountain and rose to the surface, bringing moisture from the underlying permafrost. Dust rays, slow monsters with rippling wings fifty metres across, moved through shoals of plankton with their bristly palps swinging to and fro, leaving wide wakes of darker dust.

A dust-ray trail was sighted the day after the Free Yankees captured Redd and Lee and Chen Yao. Soon after, a lookout tied to the top of the tallest tree of the shoal spotted the feeding plumes of the ray itself, and the entire population poured out of the nest and clambered trees and bamboo stands to try and catch a glimpse of the beast for themselves. They regarded it as a propitious sign: Redd would be given the ritual chance to kill it, and so gain tenure.

It was the middle of the afternoon. The clear pink sky glowed like neon and both moons were aloft: Fear a tipped crescent just above the western horizon; Panic a chip of light falling eastward. A kind of haze hung over the dust sea, and its heavy surface was the colour of molten copper. Sluggish waves rolled towards Tiger Mountain. Its lower flanks were hazed, but its flat peak was sharp and clear and seeming to rear higher than the two moons. The cliffs of its vast lava shield, six kilometres high, were so close that Lee could see house-sized boulders that piled up along their base, and the weathered folds and convolutions that vertically fretted their heights, but they might as well have been on another world.

Lee wanted, needed, yearned, to escape, to reach Tiger Mountain and climb to its top. Part of it came from the viruses, and from Miriam's partial personality, but at least half of it came from himself. He had made the promise to himself back in Ichun. But he wouldn't kill to keep that promise; too many people had died already.

Most of the Free Yankees were forward of

the nest, crowding like a gang of apes in the dense thickets of bamboo. The largest bamboo stems were as thick as Lee's waist, and black sails had been raised high on them, straining in the brisk breeze. Masked children swung through the ratlines, shrieking with laughter.

Lee had to step around and duck under a web of guy ropes and lines. Blown dust sifted over his torn shirt and jeans; dust accumulated in the finest creases of his skin and worked into the seals of his filter mask. Hanging on a leaning bamboo stem, he peered around a dense tangle of wireweed at the prow of the shoal. A dark lane ran across the red dust, wider than the shoal. It was the track of the dust ray.

One of the Free Yankees, a tall thin man in crinkling semi-opaque coveralls made from dust-ray intestine lining, came up to Lee, clapped him on the shoulder. A tattooed eagle spread its wings around the back of his skull, under the straps of his mask. He said, 'You'll help your master. Put this on and come with me!'

A group of men and women were hauling something like the upturned shell of a giant tortoise. Redd was amongst them. A young woman, with muscular arms and a V-shaped torso that made her intestine suit tight across her small flat breasts, grabbed a rope and heaved. The shell shot forward and most of the others fell on their behinds.

By the time they had scrambled up, the boat – that was what the shell was – was riding high on the dust, under the tangle of tough polished roots which fringed the shoal. The muscular woman grabbed a sheaf of harpoons and jumped down. The others followed, and the tall man made to shove Lee forward.

Lee dodged the man's advance, and jumped. For a clean instant he thought he'd made a mistake; the small round boat was crowded with a dozen people (who had lines attaching them to the boat's rail), and if he landed in the wrong place he'd tip it over. But his virus reflexes took over. He felt as if he was fluttering down as slow as a leaf and landed with one foot in the well of the boat, the other on the raised bow. He turned and raised a

hand in salute to the man who'd tried to push

But he could not go home.

He would have to live with that. No use bawling. A new world lay out there past the trees awaiting discovery. Finding a town remained his first task. Employment and a bed came next. With some kind of secure base he could carefully map out a course for the long term. Nigel Donohoe was not about to simply walk into trouble like they did in the movies, give himself away, maybe burn at the stake, nope. Not him.

The sound of clanking was an uncomfortable reminder of such mistakes. Nigel gathered his tools (he could sell some for a meal) and slithered down the slope on his back. He put himself well out of earshot before he dared stand. As he headed for the blessed cool of the trees and where he guessed a road might lie he picked leaves from his hair and brushed the grass and droppings from his clothes. He told himself that in no way whatsoever was he the itty-witsiest particle hungry, and he was not. Full of pride at this feat, he pointed in a definite manner at where the trees seemed to thin. He set off.

During the hour he spent lost in the woodland he distracted himself with a story which explained his odd appearance and lack of local knowledge. He debated the pros and cons of amnesia, but in the end rejected it because it might get him institutionalised. The sun made fragrant pools of heat here and there, pleasant on the skin and vital for orientation in this seemingly infinite stand of mottled cream and grey trunks carpeted by dead gum-leaves. It was some time before he clued into the unique shapes of the little clearings, however, so delighted was he with his idea of pretending not to know English and of having been robbed. It only clicked that he was hopelessly off beam when he spotted the huge stack of rocks once more through the trees ahead.

He shoved his hands in his pockets.

'Right son,' he said aloud, 'back again, and this time pay attention to where you're going.'

This was not so easy. It took Nigel another hour by his digital watch just to find the road which cleaved the forest. By then his head was hammered by images of crows eating him alive whilst he gasped and flailed, too weak from hunger to fend them off. For some reason he craved spring rolls. Chiko rolls. When the trees were abruptly replaced by a swathe of waist-high stumps and a fresh – no doubt convict-built – road crunched underfoot, Nigel broke into a silly grin of achievement, widened by the sight of a crossroad not far away. With signs.

He ran toward them full tilt, stumbling twice, kicking up gravel and dust out of joy as he

neared them on steadier feet.

The sign read, *Milton Keynes 7L*.

Milton Keynes? No place in Victoria had ever borne such a silly name; to Nigel's knowledge, no place on earth. He shrugged. He was not exactly Vasco Polo; he hadn't pored over every square inch of every map. It was probably a ghost town in 1978.

He set off whistling a Strangers' song. Confidently he tramped down the road which meandered through scalloped fields of what looked like oats into the rounded distance. Remember son, he told himself, you're a foreigner. You don't speak da English. He stopped for a second, to try out his language on a fat black crow perched on a stump. 'Aktivite, ramalan, barishnykov toy boy?' he asked politely.

The crow sharpened its beak ominously on the stump.

So close to Milton Keynes, Nigel held no fear of death. He shrugged. 'Kremlin pignog,' he dismissed the bird. 'Ramalan shoo-be-doo wah-wah.'

'Luck,' said the crow.

'Ta,' said Nigel, nodding. He rubbed his hands together briskly and turned back to the road.

'Ay mate! You bound for Milton Keynes?'

Nigel looked up at the buggy's driver with an uncomprehending smile. He was a compact customer, in his forties, Nigel judged from the peppered hair. The hands that gripped the leather reins were thick from work, the face looking down on him in an open, expectant but not stupid way was as dark and gaunt as those of the convicts down the road. He wore a floppy grey hat, with a band which looked like plastic but must have been polished leather, cocked back on his minuscule head.

Nigel's gaze met the man's friendly eyes for some seconds before he found the wit to answer as planned.

'Seiko elastoplast meshugga?' he asked.

'Foreignator, ay?' the man answered. 'Don't get many wokies round here.'

Nigel continued to smile fatuously as if he didn't understand a thing.

'I SAID, WE DON'T GET MANY OF YOU BLOKES ROUND HERE!' he boomed. It was a large sound for such a small head.

'Ah?' said Nigel. He nodded vigorously. 'Veznuzz nuzzle nick faldol!' he said, as if explaining the secret of why lighting a cigarette makes your bus come on time.

He appeared to have done so, and more. 'UNDERSTAND BETTER THAN YOU CAN SPEAK AY?'